

SAVAGE CHAUVINISM IN EDITH WHARTON'S *THE HOUSE OF MIRTH*

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ABSTRACT

The House of Mirth is a poignant tale of Lily Bart who fends for her integrity, chastity and preservation of her gender-neutral 'self.' Lily lives a life of appearance cultured into her through upbringing. Her exposure to scholarly ideas of free spirit and individuality through Selden emboldens her in her stance for morality and personal integrity. Cynthia Wolff finds Lily as a woman who "has long practiced the art of making herself an exquisite decorative object and under Selden's eye she comes to think of herself as a moral object as well" (Wolff 125) to avoid "uncongenial promiscuities" (Wharton 351).

Lily drops the conviction of gender and resolves for individual self with the right of choice in terms of money-making, career, beauty show and selection of friends or suitor. She is brutally interrogated and obstructed in her perusal of sweet will by male chauvinism which imagines a woman only under shade and shadow of male guard proclaiming that choice is man's credit and compulsion is a woman's undeniable duty where "to fight it on its own term ... alone" (Wharton 293) is potentially dangerous.

KEYWORDS: Chauvinism, Promiscuity, Culture & Savage

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INTRODUCTION

In *The House of Mirth*, Wharton weaves the thread of male potency with female helplessness. Chauvinistic males deliver judgement on females as scholar and well-educated Selden reserves his right of interpretation even on dead Lily Bart and Gus Trenor intimidates her of dire consequences to extract erotic ejaculation from her. In the novel, no man is in matrimonial relationship with her, nor wants to marry her and also has no lawful claim on her. Indecently and unblushingly too, all try to grab her body, her company, her proximity but on their own terms and conditions. Choice is cardinal feature of humans, humans are creative enough to create variety and multitude, they cannot be constricted or conscripted in static roles, and they define themselves through their self-designated roles.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

Wharton in her work serves a serious but detached argument about human status of women dissolving and disapproving gender bias for women. Wharton brings to spotlight hushed-up issues of feminine concern and suggests that women have no sovereign right on their body and are constantly under exposure of male gaze so much so that they lose self-possession at least, in pulsating state. Men are lured by ornamental beauty of women in such a way that they, in whims of chauvinism, assert their unlawful claim over females.

Darwin in his work, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* reveals that "women are made conscious of the value of their own beauty" (620). Darwin also observes that "mankind especially with savages ...

bodily frame is concerned, civilized men are largely attracted by the mental charm of women, by their wealth and especially by their social position ... in civilized nations women have free or almost free choice, which is not the case with barbarous races ..." (609).

Here, Darwin clarifies two things: one, the wealth and social position and intelligence are considerably influential factors in a union of man and woman and the other that women can exercise choice but only in civilized societies not in savage world.

Gilian Beer also opines that "in contrast to all other species ... among human kind the male dominants choice" (211).

Gilian also observes that "love intrigues and the marriage market involve the future of the human race" (Beer 213). Both the scholars collectively reflect on mandatory marriage and extra-marital licentiousness in men and suggest that choice whether of marriage or forceful erotic favour is purely man's choice and, above all a reserved right of males.

Wharton in her work, *The House of Mirth* show cases the financial and social dependence of her heroine Lily Bart on her future husband. Unfortunately, she faces negative repercussions of free choice in matrimonial prospects and her idea of raising her income through speculations on stock exchange boomrangs to her because of male chauvinism which recommends such favours foe a woman only if she submits before a man.

The interest of the writers lies in "portrayal of the human society engaged in a more profound struggle that of competition between the heroine and her prospective for the right to choose her sexual future" (Scotts 2).

Lily Bart chooses Chloral over compromised morality as males in her life relish her friendly company but commit no responsibility towards her. Selden is repelled by her extravagant and expensive life style but he continually interferes with her marriage suit with Percy Gryce, Rosedale and others either by his presence or principle in plausibly privileged life of lily.

Rosedale offers his proposal when he is a non -entity and Lily is at the zenith of her social reputé with proposed legacy of Penistons. He withdraws his suit when Lily loses both her reputé – moral and social and legacy of fortune. Gus Trenor speculates for Lily on stock exchange but working on the misgivings of Rosedale and erotic enticement of Lily in her 'Beauty show' tries to extract erotic favours from Lily Bart.

Wai Chee Dimock sympathizes with the plight and pitiable condition of, especially, "American women and finds marriage as a debasing exchange of women's commodified bodies" (783).

Sadly, in a woman's case choice rests with man and he treats woman as an expensive commodity perched on high scale of social rung in terms of beauty, fortune and social standing. Civilization makes it very specific in its coterie that not only nature but also the nurture of a woman is considerably considered in marriage market.

Lily Bart is a dainty, sophisticated girl, a paragon of beauty, virtue and social etiquette. She is cynosure in the parties of her friends who endear and enamour her by gifts and invitations in exchange of the pleasantries with which she radiates around in social gatherings. She is much sought after by influential suitors but with no fall back of family, fortune, frame (social) and faithful friends, her beauty provokes promiscuity in people who should profer her proclivities. She is nurtured by her mother to be a high class, elite woman by virtue of marriage but beauty and manner fall short for expectations of suitor who are more anxious for her social and financial status. Her nature-honest and genuine also frowns

at facade and frivolities in a compromised marriage as she conceives marriage as a mutual exercise of understanding love, care and intellectual expression.

She is raised by her mother as an artificial if not hypocrite entity to show off beauty, manner and ineffectual intellect as virtue to be used as currency to purchase a wealthy marriage. Her interaction and discourse with her friend, Selden introduce her to a scholarly world of ideas and interpretation highlighting the hypocrisy of relations--- personal and social. Despite best of her accommodation to scholars and intellectual instinct, her habit of luxury and leisure cannot allow her to fend for herself in a mediocre dwelling and meagre living as she is raised for influential marriage.

Wharton explains:

Her inherited tendencies had combined with early training to make her the highly specialized product that she was : an organism as helpless out of its narrow range as the sea – anemone torn from the rock. She had been fashioned to adorn and delight; ... was it her fault that the purely decorative mission is less easily and harmoniously fulfilled among social beings than in the world of nature? That it is apt to be hampered by material necessities or complicated by moral scruples?" (Wharton 350)

Surrounded by male hounds like Rosedale, Gus Trenor and other commentators, she should have embraced an early, material, compromised marriage to bore herself whole life with Percy Gryce or with Rosedale to be decked up in painfully decorative and fashionable attires. She can exercise a normal, natural life with moral scruples only if she earns her own social and financial standing as good as of Rosedale or Gus Trenor or join humble home with Selden stripping her off from luxury and lavish life.

Inheriting the instinct of her father, Lily too speculates at stock-exchange with help of Gus Trenor but a woman without a male in figure of husband or father is a vulnerable sex toy. Lily's endeavour of self -dependence through her earnings from stock exchange is, unblushingly, posed as a promiscuous gesture with social taboo of gambling by chauvinistic seducer, Gus Trenor. He too is fuelled by another chauvinistic male, Rosedale who confided in him about Lily's visit to Selden's flat all alone. Gus Trenor refers to Lily yhis misadventure of her to suggest her yhat she is a woman of loose morals and assumed to be indulged in fare-encounter. He blurts out, "... God, you go to men's houses fast enough in broad daylight..." (Wharton 169)

Rosedale's constant spying over her and his question "why don't you use those letters of hers (Bertha) you bought last year" (Wharton 299) unnerves her. This conspiracy of males to trap and target a woman for erotic favors, to spoil her social and moral reputation in case she resents, resists and rehabilitates herself without their care.

Lily's last attempt to win a suitor by exposure of her curves and beauty in one sheet defames her as an insensible, undomestic and item girl fit to be a concubine. Even if Rosedale reconsiders his proposal for Lily, his own experience of having seen Lily in Selden's flat blended with Bertha's accusation on Lily about Latter's flirtation with former's husband force his better judgement to renounce his suit.

George Dorset another chauvinistic male misinterpretes frank and free nature of Lily as her private interest in her. His sour relationship, loveless bond with his wife, his wife's blame on Lily, Lily's silence and George Dorset's submissive consent to his wife's whims allow all to apparently assume that Lily Bart own a flirtations nature who harbours a disagreeable taste for fidelity and devotion in conventional marriage. Lily discards the idea of adaptation in appearance and compulsory comportment to the feminine ethics more governed by chauvinism of male and less propelled by creativity and

courage of female.

The courage, curiosity and creativity cuddled in her core culminates into a careless spatial, risk with Selden in his flat and with financial and moral risk with Gus Trenor.

The first adventure blows out her flickering hope of marriage with Rosedale and the second risk make her forfeit her entire fortune with Gus Trenor inviting surprise and suspicion of Selden even when dead Lily can neither articulate her pain nor respond to his reason of paying off to Gus Trenor. Gus Trenor is a broker, gambler at stock exchange and any financial dealing with him, however fair it is, reveals gambling fondness of Lily and her close ties with Gus Trenor male chauvinism allows men relations, risk, relation, ransom and rehabilitation but women are not allowed and if permitted any how, they have to shun their shame sensibility and domesticity. Market is not meant for elite women.

Her altruistic and competitive impulse digs up a dilemma in her that horribly haunts her. She weighs in her heart as on scales material necessities and moral compunction, the scale of latter's goes down and she feels an incredible instinct "of taste, of training, of blind inherited scruples, rose against other feeling. Her strongest sense was one of personal contamination" (Wharton).

Lily here, evolves in her moral strength acquired by social association e.g. with Selden and her inherent impulse for virtue and goodness. Her innate morality, an evolutionary effort strengthens her "resolve to act differently for future and this is conscience" (Darwin 634).

Lily resists the temptation of seeking revenge or rehabilitation with Dorsets. This stance of Lily drenched in moral ink dilutes her survival in an opportunist and unsupportive world with her priority of principles over privileges. Lily's deepest and disturbing despair divulges that she is impoverished spirit as "her impulses of resistance has sufficed to maintain her self respect" (Wharton 305).

She loses social support because of her sour relationship with Bertha Dorset and Judy Trenor. These women believe concocted tall of their husband and influencing people with their wealth and clout make Lily's social life miserable and contemptuous.

Truth about any girl is that once she is talked about she is done for ... you see I never thought of preparing a version in advance as Bertha did ... (Wharton 262)

Male chauvinism spreads its tentacles and makes Lily's risky speculations an open secret; in absence of any anchor of potential and possibilities Lily Bart precludes her prerogative participation in evolutionary practice and experiences "the feeling of being something rootless ... without anything to which poor. Little tentacles of self could cling before the awful flood submerged them" (Wharton 371).

Lily Bart caught in the whirlpool of "Web of custom, manners, culture ... elaborately spun about herself" (qtd. in Tuttleton 564) sticks to the rock of moral commitment. Lily chooses "her free spirit quivering for flight" (Wharton 74) but gradually she understands that "men understand a woman's motive" (Wharton 96).

Unfortunately Lily's flight from her reality is a blind impulse or instinct bound by her limited resources and unreasonable choice of independent income and status, conversing within conventional contours, Wharton portrays Lily as a smart and cunning girl who "studies her prey" (17) and "readies herself to affect his capture" (23). Lily is a motherless child and feels the role of mother in procuring marriage partner to daughter. She thinks, "a mother know how to contrive

opportunities without conceding favours ... mother's unwavering vigilance and foresight to land her daughters safely, in the arm of wealth and suitability Lily" (Wharton 105).

She joins parties and social gathering for marriage business and has a reputation for hunting for husband. Lily loses Percy Gryce for her temptation to have a stroll with Selden; she loses Rosedale to enjoy at Bertha's cruise; she loses her social and moral repute for her frank, genuine but gender forbidden indulgence with Gus Trenor and George Dorset. Such trivial liberties exact an exorbitant price from Lily Bart.

Her forceful entry in male bastion of stock exchange in provocative feminine shape and enviable watch less beauty, her naiveness in such seasoned business and her dependence on hounds like Gus Trenor compounded with her mischievous unwed proximity with Selden in solitude worsen her position in social establishments

Charlotte Perkins Gilman in her work, *Women and Economics* asserts:

Marriage ... is what woman is born for, what she is trained for, what she is exhibited for. It is, moreover, her means of honourable Livelihood and advancement. But she must not even look as if she wanted it! ... her chances lessen with each year ... If she does not succeed in being chosen, she becomes a thing of mild popular contempt, a human being with no further place in life (87-88).

According to Gilman, Lily's fault lies in her proactive role in procuring husbands for her followed by her indifference and passivity for her suit as she does not find marriage the sole object of life and seeks for companionship not coercion in marriage. She also risks her reputation as her choice for money-making at stock exchange with man's help, other than family, goes parallel with her sole occupation marriage. When Lily fails in marriage suits, she is openly, contemptuously thrown out of gear, out of her favourite clique to dull and drab, dilapidated dwellings of boarding house.

Gilman's idea precipitates the conviction that women are counted to be successful only when they develop the ability to arouse inspire the chauvinistic males to select them. Unconventional, risk-loving Lily loses on honourable selection as a wife; immoral selection, she reefs in her chloral, in death.

Elizabeth, highlighting ornamental image of women as her redeeming feature in marriage, deliberates on Wharton's opinion of showcasing "Woman's dress functions as a public display of household's conspicuous consumption and ability to pay" (Ammons 29).

Lily in her full bloom rejects Rosedale as she harbours aversion to her domesticated, fashionable role as drawing room celebrity as a symbol of Rosedale's success. But Lily rejects him not to be "expensive toy in hands of a spoiled child" (Wharton 281).

Chauvinistic males express interest in ornamental display of Lily's body but her resentment for social imperatives which commodify her as a sex symbol is unpalatable for them. Lily fights for social respectability turning down licentious implications in her relations with Rosedale or Gus Trenor, she tries her hand at menial and low class work of hat-making but her upbringing never accorded her the strength to harden herself in task not meant for her class.

Gus Trenor tricks her to visit him in late evening when he is drunk and in his savage element. He blocks her way and definitely asserts himself. "He comes at Lily "squaring his shoulders aggressively" with reddening ... the brutality of the thrust gave her the dizziness that tolls on a physical blow ... to rage : her recoil of abhorrence had called out the primitive man" (Wharton 169-170).

This savage wants to keep Lily as his concubine in an “abject state of bondage” (Darwin 620).

CONCLUSIONS

Wharton takes up the issue of female’s insecurity in absence of family especially, father and husband. Lily— penniless, expensive, unaccomplished in male bastion is intrigued by chauvinistic hounds who recommend male guard for a woman in any way. “It is not weal or woe of any one individual but that of the human race to come, which is here at stake” (Asher 323).

Diana Trilling also highlights the plight of Lily as she finds “The house of Mirth ... passionately a money story” (1962).

The House of Mirth is like a house where there is a passion and bargains for possession and power as a permanent prescription and where the heroine dies to protect and preserve as Nina Bayam also points out “a concept of woman as inevitable sexual prey” (26). In the same regard, Wershoven also showcases “rebellion (of Lily) against the massed power of the status quo.” (28)

Erick Erickson also notes that “identity development of a person is a process located in the core of the individual ... in the core of his/her communal culture” (22).

Lily is weakened by her acculturation to conform to elite life style at any cost but gradually, she develops “her new self free from weakness and flaw” (Wolff 131) to take a firm resolution to embrace dignified death over dull duty of a luxuriated concubine of chauvinistic sharks. It is true that Lily’s “sense of self worth is fragile ... but it is not the end but the beginning of change” (Bayam 20).

Lily’s achievement is an achievement of entire womanhood yelling at men with powerful echo that a woman reserves the right to protect her ‘self’ her chastity, values and decently if not alive than in decent demise. Her “desire for privacy and independence ... shrinking from sympathy” (Wharton 334) is distasteful to her society.

Her friend, Selden exercises over her “universal right of a man to enlighten woman ... unconsciously placed in a false position” (Wharton 346) but posits no hope or course for her decent survival. Lily’s “irresistible sense of triumph and self pride is annihilated by utilitarian existence of her world” (Wharton 346).

Lily dies but question lingers long, looms large: “Why must a girl pay so clearly for her least escape from routine?... Why does she not allow herself the luxury of an impulse?” (Wharton 17).

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